

## The Resource Center Newsletter

### **Technology: Friend or Foe? A Spotlight on Co-Parenting Apps in Bonner County, Idaho**

For years, courts and advocates have viewed technology as extremely detrimental to families affected by domestic violence. A recent Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) survey conducted by the Safety Net Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), found that 79% of abusers monitor survivors' social media accounts, 74% monitor victims by text messages, and 71% monitor survivors' computer activities. Perpetrators use all forms of technology to stalk, harass, and abuse their victims.<sup>1</sup> The OVC survey also noted that abusers use their children to stalk and track their victims through their children's cell phones (89%), social networks (63%), and laptops (38%).<sup>2</sup> Technology has long been at the root of continued and ongoing victimization.

As a veteran judge, I have seen multiple forms of abuse applied through technology and used to victimize further families already affected by domestic violence. The use of technology often goes undetected, but it is pervasive and can indicate high levels of dangerousness. For those of us working to address domestic violence within our communities, the mention of using technology as a positive step gives us pause and heightens our skepticism that anything good can possibly come from unleashing the power of technology into the hands of batterers in co-parenting relationships. The truth is, however, that technology is neither inherently good nor bad. Instead, it is all about how technology is used. What if technology could be used to keep victims and their children safer in those cases where the victim and the perpetrator have a child in common?

In domestic violence cases where courts are ordering visitation between children and an abusive parent, and contact between the co-parents is not prohibited by the court, applications (apps) and other technology may add a layer of distance and safety that was not available previously.

An example of how technology can facilitate "peaceful contact" while still keeping parties safe by following models of accountability, monitoring, and interventions can be found in Northern Idaho (Bonner County) and its use of coParenter (a co-parenting app). This pilot program involves Bonner County's family court, criminal court, and probation office, which work with both the perpetrator and the victim through the app. This pilot identifies victim families with at least one child in common who have an ongoing case in family court and an adjudicated criminal case with a grant of probation to the perpetrator. In these pilot cases, a judge has determined that the perpetrator will have some level of contact with the minor child(ren), and

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.techsafety.org/blog/tag/NNEDV+survey> (last accessed December 18, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> See *Id*; see also *A Glimpse From the Field: How Abusers Are Misusing Technology*, downloadable at [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51dc541ce4b03ebab8c5c88c/t/54e3d1b6e4b08500fcb455a0/1424216502058/NNEDV\\_Glimpse+From+the+Field+-+2014.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51dc541ce4b03ebab8c5c88c/t/54e3d1b6e4b08500fcb455a0/1424216502058/NNEDV_Glimpse+From+the+Field+-+2014.pdf).

the only communication that the perpetrator may have with the victim is on a dedicated communication channel monitored (with permission of pilot participants) through the probation office.

Using a co-parenting app that can be monitored allows victims to be in a physically and emotionally safe space. Victims can communicate with perpetrators from the safety of their own home surrounded by people or things that create a safety net. Perpetrators who violate the app's terms of service by using the app as a tool to victimize may violate their probation.

Bonner County Adult Misdemeanor Probation Officer Darci L. Haug had this to say:

“As a probation officer who supervises domestic violence offenders, one of the biggest obstacles is discerning what truly goes on ‘behind closed doors’ despite what victims and offenders report to probation. Due to the complexities and multi-faceted dynamics of domestic violence, it’s very common to hear from both victims and offenders that everything is going well and probation shouldn’t be concerned. Yet probation is. There is a constant concern for the safety of the victim as well as the children in these relationships. Often safety is being compromised daily and right under my ever watchful nose.

The use of the coParenter app in supervising domestic violence cases has been an invaluable tool that not only allows for direct oversight of communications with a victim but serves as a way to hold an offender accountable by identifying any controlling or abusive language. I initially thought using an app would be a great tool to monitor some of the most contentious cases where parents often fight for the sake of fighting, using the children as pawns in their emotional game of cat and mouse. However, little did I know it would serve an even greater purpose, one that truly benefits all involved, especially the innocent children.

The features most utilized by my probationers are the messaging, check-ins (for child exchange purposes), and journal. One probationer, while initially reluctant to use an app has reported feeling safer knowing all messages, not just his, were being recorded and monitored. He is also recognizing the app helps keep his focus on what’s best for his child, rather than just fighting with his co-parent.”

Using technology, victims are also able to document incidents, keep track of messages, keep track of calendars, and feel on top of their co-parenting responsibilities with minimal physical interaction with their abuser. There are many apps that seek to assist families in a positive way. Among those widely in use today are Our Family Wizard, AppClose, Talking Parents, and coParenter. They offer monitored messaging and other features that are designed to allow the users to communicate in a peaceful and reportable way. These apps and others help both victims and perpetrators’ alike have a clear record of their conversations and provide courts with direct access to the content of the communication. They are tools that judges can use to try to insure peaceful contact between parents.

March 2020

This project was made possible by Grant Number 90EV039-04-00 from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

While technology may still be used as an implement to terrorize victims and their children, it is now becoming a very real shield to protect victims and children with equal strength.

*Judge Sherrill Ellsworth is a Superior Court Judge for the Superior Court of Riverside County, California, and is the founder of coParenter.*

March 2020

This project was made possible by Grant Number 90EV039-04-00 from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.